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ABSTRACT

In carrying out a successful writing workshop, careful attention must be given to the proper role and function of the teacher. Research indicates the power of extended peer response to writing and the benefits of writers talking with their peers about their writing. To construct more specific guidelines for the function of teachers in writing workshops, a study was undertaken at a university whose writing program strongly encourages the use of writing workshops. The workshop activities of three teachers were observed over the course of an entire semester. Results show that planning for workshops must give priority to the essential acts of collaboration: student sharing; mirroring; discussing strengths, weaknesses and form; and making suggestions. A priority for these teachers is helping students acquire a useful metalanguage for talking about their writing. Another priority for these successful workshop instructors is the creation of an interpersonal climate in the classroom. Instructors using workshops must clearly facilitate the specific agenda for each session. Teacher support and valuing of student ideas are key elements. Numerous episodes and transcriptions of classroom dialogues and teacher interviews demonstrate the efficacy of these principles. In short, teachers who plan on using writing workshops should receive extensive training in: (1) how to establish a trusting environment that initiates and sustains writing; (2) how to share with students power and authority over their texts and responsibility for their own learning; (3) how to facilitate critical peer feedback; and (4) how to support definite plans for change once appropriate peer commentary is offered. (HB)

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The Teacher's Role in the Writing Workshop

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The purpose of my study of the writing workshop was to describe the role of the teacher as facilitator and participant in the dialectical conversation in which learning and change take place. By "writing workshop," I mean that form of collaborative learning in which the teacher conducts a whole class discussion such that students are reading and talking about the texts of their peers with the intention of helping the writer improve through revision.

Teachers want to capitalize on the power of extended peer response because it gives student writers rich data upon which to base new forays into the world through language. We know from current research that talking with peers provides writers with a sounding board for their ideas, helps them discover what they have to say and write, offers alternatives for thinking, and teaches them the benefits of compromise.

Although we are aware of the value of this kind of social interaction in teaching writing, we still need to establish more guidelines and models for collaboration. We need training in "how to organize and interpret the activity of learning to write through group interaction" (Trimbur, 1985, p. 87), while still assuring that we teachers take our share of responsibility for what students learn and use our greater insight to help plan optimal conditions for the collaborative experiences of our writers.

In order to begin to construct such guidelines, I chose to conduct my study at a university whose writing program strongly supports the workshop approach. I selected three teachers recommended by their writing program administrators as skilled and experienced in implementing collaborative learning techniques. I observed the writing workshops of these three teachers over the course of one semester. After taping, transcribing, and analyzing the conversation that took place in each workshop session, I interviewed the teacher to learn the purpose and goals of the session, the rationale behind the planned activities and the intentions behind the teacher's own talk during the workshop; in addition, I wanted to know how the teacher critiqued and evaluated what actually occurred during the session.

My findings were that the planning and structure of each workshop must give priority to the essential acts of collaboration--student sharing; mirroring; discussing strengths, weaknesses, and form; and making suggestions. The success of collaboration seems to depend on creating an environment in which students feel free to speak and in which a well-trained reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) models a metalanguage--incorporated into critical peer commentary as the

semester proceeds--that leads student writers into more effective revision of drafts-in-progress.

In fact, helping students acquire a useful metalanguage for talking about their emerging texts may be the teacher's most important role in facilitating an effective writing workshop. In order for us to increase our awareness of ourselves as we model for our students how to talk productively about their texts, let's examine more closely the priorities and beliefs of these three successful workshop leaders.

The first priority for these teachers was the interpersonal climate of the classroom environment, including developing familiarity among students and teacher, drawing everyone closer into a community of writers who respect (or learn to respect) each other's opinions. One of the teachers, for example, spent time at the beginning of the term asking students to learn each other's names and to find out each other's interests, commenting that "when students do not like each other, little of anything collaborative is possible."

Developing familiarity served as the underpinning for another aspect of the interpersonal climate--mutual trust and willingness to share the balance of authority. One teacher demonstrated her trust in the writer's ability to conduct the discussion, even though the student was reluctant to do so. "Sarah has asked me to lead, which I will do; but I would like you to speak to her because she is the writer. And at any point that she wants to break in and speak or ask questions, she has the floor."

The second subject about which these teachers held strong beliefs concerned the nature and characteristics of classroom discourse which facilitates analysis and revision of writing. This type of discourse includes probing questions designed to elicit thoughtful responses from students; reinforcement of student comments through paraphrasing, asking for repetition of a remark, or calling attention to a comment with a phrase such as "what an interesting idea"; connecting comments which indicate that everyone needs to listen on a "global" level; and the summarial comment by either the student or teacher. Following is an excerpt that shows how one teacher encouraged the class to speak freely about their writing concerns (T designates teacher, F designates female student, and M designates male student):

F. How do we talk about, like I feel that I had some trouble with the style, but I don't know how to say it, or if indeed I should criticize.

T. Give it a shot; let's see what happens.

F. Well, sometimes I just felt like the sentences were too heavy.

T. Can you find us one?

F. Well, I just have a problem saying this because I feel like maybe I'm just not accepting his style, like I am trying to impose something; so that's why I'm not excited about talking about this. But I wanted to find out if there's anyone else who had trouble with. . . .

T. You really wiggled out of that one. Find us a sentence.

F. OK. Well, it was a good try. Um. . . .

T. I have one, if you can't find one. Try and find one.

Another facet of discourse is how it addresses and facilitates the process or agenda of the class. Included in this category would be discussing strengths and weaknesses of writing-in-progress, analyzing the writer's thinking and problems as well as suggesting revisions, and trusting that important things will come up during the discussion. In the following example, the teacher modeled how to analyze a problem in a passage:

> So you are identifying this as a major transitional paragraph. Notice Karl's question: "I don't know if this paragraph should go here." Imagine rethinking that question, "Is this paragraph doing what it should do to get me from the first part of this essay to the more reflective part of the essay?" If you're thinking, "I don't know if it is in the right spot," look at what has come before, look at what's coming after, and see if that paragraph is doing its job to move you into the next section. The first instinct of a writer might be to say, "It shouldn't be here. I'll just <u>can</u> it," when actually it may be a problem of tone or intention in that spot.

A third topic of concern was that of the role of the teacher in the collaborative learning workshop, including encouraging dialogue, supporting ideas, giving others the last word, developing mutual trust, mirroring, pointing out and clarifying, valuing ideas, and summarizing discussions. In class, when a student said, "I think my favorite sentence is 'I actually realized how thin I am and how close my ribs are to my skin,'" the teacher encouraged dialogue with "why do you like it?" A discussion followed, including student comments such as "because that's really what happens," and "when people say they feel mortal, that's what they actually are feeling"--which the teacher supported, clarified, and at the same time valued by responding, "Right, so instead of saying 'I feel mortal,' he used a metaphor that made a really strong connection with the reader. A less-skilled writer wouldn't have done that. He would have just said, 'I feel mortal.'"

Here is another illustration of a teacher supporting and valuing a student's ideas:

M. I can hear you [the writer] telling the same stories in a conversation; the idea is very much an exploration of a certain aspect of your relationship.

T. That's a nice definition of the personal narrative: "the exploration of the ideas to show a certain aspect of a relationship."

A final subject of importance to these teachers was the degree of involving the student writer in the discourse about his own writing, depending partly on the willingness of the writer to participate in what could be a threatening or scarey situation. Some students freely discussed their difficulties as writers: "I guess one of my first concerns was I wanted it to read as kind of--this whole idea of not really a set of arguments. I was worried about sort of switching into this argumentative voice instead of doing it in this kind of, maybe, a more personal voice, just expressing. . . ." However, at other times, the teacher directed the focus to the writer: "Speak to the writer; speak to Peter. What is your reaction to that, Peter? You are in charge of this discussion."

These teachers believed that the role of peers in the collaborative learning workshop is to provide a forum to react to the reading of an essay, to identify strengths and weaknesses of texts, and to give both written and verbal suggestions for revisions. The following excerpt shows how one teacher involved the students in the revision process:

F. I liked how the ending went back to the beginning--going up the stairs.

T. Yeah, yeah. Very simply, why did that--and you can do a little psychoanalysis on all people who read--why does that give pleasure?

M. It envelopes, like a completed circle.

T. Closure makes people happy. We start here and we end here. Beats me why. That much analysis I can't do for you. But it is a sense of coming round, a sense of harmony, when you end where you start.

M. I was just going to say generally that the detail is really good. Probably one reason why the closure worked well is that after the first paragraph, you feel like you are no longer reading: you are being pulled into the . . . sort of like you are going into the past with her. And then the closure works at the end because we are pulled out and that's the end, it's all tied up, and you get back to your position of just being an interested reader.

The following episode demonstrates student writer, teacher and peers working together in their various roles to get different perspectives on the

direction or flow of the essay. A student observed, "I just noticed that nobody has commented on the second half of the essay whatsoever, but we've discussed its ramifications on the first half of the essay. Would anyone have been aware of the tension in the first half without having read the second half?" The teacher reinforced this student's remark: "It's a key observation; say it again!" Another peer suggested, "I feel that you [the writer] weren't playing the journalist in the first part of the essay, but that you were just scared; and you were trying to say that you avoided the whole thing because you were ethical." Later in the same discussion, the writer offered, "I think my original conception was that the essay, the real meat of the essay, was going to be the last section and everything else was just a prelude to it. But everyone has obviously reacted more strongly the other way. I'm going to reconsider the whole set-up."

With this kind of trust and sharing of authority, students increase their ability to help each other celebrate the strengths of their essays, diagnose weaknesses, and prescribe revisions. One way to share authority is for the teacher to allow and encourage student writers to converse directly with their peers rather than have all exchanges of conversation filtered through the teacher. Students can learn to conduct more and more of the discussion themselves, the teacher moving into the background as facilitator and participant as the semester goes on.

By analyzing these excerpts of dialogue between experienced teachers and their writing students, we can see that the function of teacher and peers must be carefully distinguished. If irresponsibly set up, monitored, and reinforced--undirected and unplanned group talk can result in no more than a pooling of students' ignorance and frustration over what is expected of them. Sometimes our workshop discussions are insubstantial or the sound suggestions elicited are not incorporated into subsequent student writing. A teacher who relies only on what "seems to work with students" may attribute these failures to idiosyncracies of the particular group or to environmental conditions--rather than conduct a careful review of his or her own role.

Teachers thus need extensive training in (a) how to establish a trusting environment that initiates and sustains writing; (b) how to share with students power and authority over their texts and responsibility for their own learning; (c) how to facilitate critical peer feedback; and (d) how to support definite plans for change once appropriate peer commentary is offered. They need to learn more about how writers "establish and maintain immediate communities which

function within the larger, 'disciplinary' communities" (Reither and Vipond, 1989, p. 859) in which writers learn from and teach one another.

With the establishment of more guidelines and models for collaboration such as I have proposed here, teachers--as reflective practitioners critically monitoring their own behavior--can assess and improve the effectiveness of their roles in the writing workshop to help students take their place in the community of writers.

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